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To the Human Services Subcommittee:

We are testifying today to object to the Appropriations House Bill #6380 and show our support for keeping BESB as a separate agency serving the blind community in Connecticut. As a family with 2 children with visual impairments, BESB has become an integral and much needed part of our lives. Visual impairment is a disability which has so many specialized needs. BESB has been a resource for our family and has been able to streamline services for our children without interruption. The proposed splitting of the agency would cause our children to be covered by 2 different agencies creating confusion and inconvenience.

Joseph, the older of our two sons, has low vision and is having success in college due to BESB staff having knowledge of him and working hard on his transition. His transition from high school to college was an extremely difficult time; he had many supports in place in high school. But in order to be successful at the college level a student must advocate for himself to ensure that those supports get in place. Advocating for oneself is a skill that requires much practice and encouragement from those involved. For Joseph, an intensive transition program was needed and was facilitated by his vocational rehabilitation counselor and teacher of the visually impaired from BESB, who knew Joseph and his strengths and weaknesses. At such a vulnerable time in his life a switch to a new agency and new unfamiliar people would have set him back and possibly ended his college hopes.

Our younger son Kevin has been blind since birth and is a Braille reader. He is currently in 6th grade in the public school in our town with support from a teacher of the visually impaired and an orientation and mobility specialist both from BESB. His needs are very specialized and necessitate instruction from highly trained educators in Braille, assistive technology, orientation and mobility skills, daily living skills, social skills, and recreation skills. BESB has worked hard to offer many programs for visually impaired children to address these specialized areas of instruction. These programs give the children an opportunity to be with peers who are experiencing the same issues. Blindness can be quite isolating when a child is surrounded by sighted peers. Instruction in the expanded core curriculum is critical to a child's wellbeing. Having the BESB professionals in one agency assures communication between them. Our concerns and questions of how Kevin will do things as an adult are answered because his teacher of the visually impaired has access to the individuals that work with adults.

As parents of two blind children who have benefitted from BESB services we are in the position to be able to evaluate potential difficulties that would develop if the split were allowed.

Duplicity of resources – Blind individuals require much assistance, including Braille printing, technology services, Braille instruction, orientation and mobility instruction, transition to college services, transition to work services, support of athletic programs and others. They are now adequately addressed under one service provider but would require additional personnel and equipment if divided.

Additional bureaucracy – specifically at the critical time of life when transition from secondary school to college or to the workforce occurs. This is currently seamless and efficient but will produce another unnecessary layer of bureaucracy if the agency is split between 2 departments.

Potential for diminished services – the agency already lost positions and may have additional cuts. Transfer of the split agency to 2 existing large departments with individuals without visual impairment knowledge in a position of power will most likely result in a diluted service with funding being absorbed into the larger pot. The savings implied in the reorganization are miniscule compared to the disruption and potential lack of services to children and adults that can ultimately affect them for a lifetime. Putting the teachers of the visually impaired under State Department of Education seems like a short term plan. This agency does not provide direct services or have any knowledge of the specialized educational needs of children who are blind. They are not prepared to implement the kind of programming BESB client's need. It is a conflict of interest since they are involved with evaluating and monitoring educational programs not offering direct services. Our fear is that the State Department of Education would simply give the money to towns and do away with state services. Towns are not in a position to hire their own teachers for 1 or 2 students which will likely result in no services to children, our children, who need so much specialized instruction. Although the intent might not be to impact services, the result will.

The current BESB structure allows for a continuum of care throughout a person's life. This continuum will be lost if the agency is split. Division of the current BESB agency into 2 separate departments is unlikely to result in cost savings, increased efficiency or streamlining. The blind community, being unique, requires a strengthening of the current system, not division and reduction.

Thank you for your consideration.
Laurie and Rich Eckler